

## Graeme Charles on Co-operation in The Devondaler



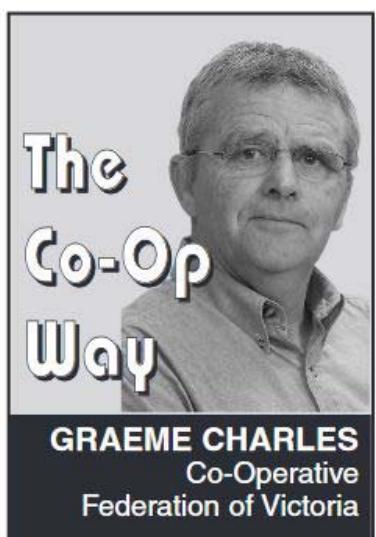
Graeme Charles was the Executive Officer and Secretary of the Co-operative Federation of Victoria Ltd between 1999 and 2002 and Deputy Chairman between 2002 and 2008 – the peak body for co-operatives in the Australian State of Victoria.

Between 2006 and 2008 Graeme Charles was a guest columnist for The Devondaler – the monthly newspaper of Murray Goulburn Co-operative Co. Limited. The Devondaler was established in 1986.

The Co-operative is one of Australia's largest with 2200 dairy farmer members and more than 2000 employees.

Twenty of these columns have been reproduced.

### Why are we Ignoring Co-operative Solution?



Co-operatives generally come into existence when a group of people see the need for a specific service to be provided. These then organise a group of people to meet the identified need through a co-operative. Others from the same stakeholder group then see the advantages gained by the founding members and join in with them. This results in the co-operative growing in size and economic strength. One has only to reflect on the success of Murray Goulburn Co-operative Company which has grown into the giant business it is today from its humble beginnings just 50 years ago to see evidence of this.

I wonder then why those of us who are benefiting from whichever co-operative we are currently members of, continually seem to ignore the co-operative option when faced with loss of services in our communities, rural communities in particular.

It seems to me that there are so many areas where co-operatives could be used to meet community needs. Note that I have said could, not would, because co-operatives are no different from any other business form, inasmuch as the business case needs to be proven before embarking on the establishment of that business.

Consider health services, banking and telecommunications, just to name a few areas, where rural residents have seen services decline or disappear over the last twenty or thirty years. In each of these three industries, particularly in other countries around the world, co-operatives have played and continue to play an important role in bringing services to

otherwise disadvantaged people. The ongoing debate in this country about telecommunication services “in the bush” is singular in my mind because of the complete absence within that debate of the possible role that co-operatives could play in providing quality telecommunication services to rural Australians. We need look no further than the United States of America where large numbers of rural residents receive their telecommunication, telephone and electric services via co-operatives. That’s co-operatives that they own and control as members, not some business that will decide whether they wish to continue providing services or not in a particular region.

Health services are another obvious candidate for co-operative solutions. In the inner western suburbs of Melbourne, Westgate Health Co-operative provides medical and related services to its 7000 members via clinics in South Kingsville and Newport. In 1980 the Westgate Baptist Community established the co-operative because of their concern at the lack of bulk-billing medical services in that neighbourhood. Those committed residents decided to develop their own health service and were able to attract a general practitioner to start a medical practice. The co-operative now employs 11 GP’s, 2 dentists, 3 dental nurses and 3 practice nurses.

Why is it then, that Westgate Health is the only current example of a health co-operative in Victoria, and that we are not even talking about co-operatives in the telecommunication debate? There are many reasons for this. Historically, co-operatives have often been promoted and supported by people external to the co-operative during their formative years. This is not happening in Australia, in fact the opposite is happening. People are being dissuaded from forming co-operatives and in some cases encouraged to consider alternative business forms even after they have established a co-operative. Governments throughout Europe, in the USA, in Japan and in many other countries too, but not in Australia, have followed policies of providing various forms of support to foster the development of co-operatives within their own borders.

Can you see a situation in your community that might represent a co-operative opportunity? Please feel free to contact the Co-operative Federation of Victoria for help and advice. Visit the Federation’s website [www.australia.coop/](http://www.australia.coop/)

10 March 2007



## List of Graeme Charles articles published between 2006 - 2008

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